

Susan Simek:

Thanks very much for letting me cut up your vellums. As you can see from the attached, it came out beautifully.

Marilyn Whitman

10/18/63

Dan: Brownlee H. wanted to send this out, so perhaps you might want to check with him to see what was what.

"MCNAMARA AND THE PENTAGON"

A comparison of the written transcript of this interview with the actual program gives strong evidence of the important role of the television camera even in a relatively static presentation. There is little that is startling or even noteworthy in the printed text, and relatively little basis for a firm inference as to the personality of the speaker, whereas the combination of picture and sound gives an impression of McNamara's personality that is both strong and coherent.

Although the precise reaction of the individual viewer would depend upon his prior image of McNamara and upon the matters that the viewer's attitudes and interests made salient, I suspect that on balance the overall impact of this show may have been quite unfavorable to McNamara, since it exhibited with rather devastating clarity just those traits which his unsympathetic critics have already stereotyped in the public mind: cocksureness, reasoning not in itself simplistic but asserted with undue dogmatism, deprecation of the role of military experience and intuition, combined -- adding insult to injury -- with denial of the depth of military resentment, deprecation of uncertainties and complexities beyond those he explicitly recognizes, a patronizing didactic manner, and apparent lack of any sense of personal limitations (at least, relative to the opposition!). This is the way Goldwater, Hanson Baldwin, McClellan, et al. describe the Secretary; and that is, I'm afraid, the way he exposed himself to the television audience in this interview. After this program, his most sympathetic proponent could hardly claim that the stereotyped characterization is without any basis. Nor did the program seem deliberately unfair (although of course it's impossible to judge that fully without considering all the material from which these excerpts were collected). At a number of points the interviewer could be said to have tipped McNamara off as to the kind of criticism which his present remarks were supporting ("there's been suggestions...that you...give them simple little lessons in things," this following a simple little lesson by McNamara totally irrelevant to the question asked). Yet the Secretary blithely avoided every opportunity to take the edge off those criticisms by hinting at reserves of modesty or uncertainty or at a consciousness that some of his decisions might reasonably, and did, give rise to controversy. If Reasoner was digging holes, McNamara was leaping into them with great zest.

So far as it goes then, the program must be considered a valid exposition. But how far does it go? Is this all there is to McNamara? That is not a rhetorical question: I believe there are many knowledgeable people who would be willing to answer "yes." This includes many people

who have witnessed him far more, and in a greater variety of circumstances, than I have. Nevertheless, on the basis of one experience with him that lasted scarcely longer than your program -- specifically, a two-hour discussion over lunch in his office -- I believe that the answer is "no."

When one finds that his privately-expressed views and modes of thought are at considerable variance from the opinions, style of reasoning, and pattern of behavior publicly exhibited, there is probably no single, best answer to the question: "Which is the real McNamara"? But it is possible to say, even on the basis of a conversation shorter than this one, that the divergence is there, that the Secretary is self-conscious of its existence, and that he perceives complex motives for maintaining it: relating to his needs to compromise multiple and often conflicting responsibilities, objectives, and constraints.

This is not to say that the extent of divergence is more extreme than is probably the case with most high political figures, nor that his public face is to an unusual degree a facade. Any decisionmaker who must balance the demands of the President, the Services, Congress, Allies, and his own staff, and who, when he speaks publicly must speak to all these audiences at once, and to the Soviet Union as well, must weigh his words, and on occasion simplify, obscure, or forego reference to considerations, legitimate but controversial, that may count heavily with him. What is noteworthy is that "even" McNamara responds to this imperative. That point does not go quite without saying, for neither his stereotype nor his actual performance on occasions such as this program tend to suggest that he is capable of acting so "politically" or, to use a nicer word, "diplomatically." (I am not referring so much to party politics as to political relationships within the Pentagon, between the Administration and Congress, and within the Western Alliance.)

As for the content of his views, all that seems necessary to say here is that it differed from the exposition in this program in two basic respects: (a) the reasons he emphasized for specific decisions and public positions were more varied and less simple than those he tends to cite in public; (b) he showed a grave appreciation of the complex responsibilities he bears, not only to this generation of Americans but to future generations and to the people of the world, as second in command of the American nuclear power.

The first of these points can easily be substantiated by a great deal of internal documentation in the Pentagon. However he may choose to express himself in public, McNamara's mind does not run to dichotomies, or to lists of relevant factors that stop with two or three. The world that McNamara sees may seem, to other eyes, unnaturally sharp, suspiciously free of haze in the far reaches; but it is not a simple world.

In this one respect, perhaps, the program did fall short of what it might have achieved. It might be impossible to induce McNamara, in front of a national television audience, to be other than didactic; but conceivably another interviewer might have drawn from him, on a few points, the seminar talk instead of the grade-school chart.

Whether any interviewer could have persuaded him to talk more frankly and perceptively on such touchy subjects as civil-military relations in the Pentagon is a harder question; probably not. Likewise for my second point, the implications of the nuclear weapons era. The cross-currents of attitudes on that subject, among our Allies, our opponents and our own electorate, are too varied and too emotional to make it easy for a Secretary of Defense to air his reflections and concerns freely upon these matters. (What complicates this problem for McNamara is precisely his consciousness of the present reliance of the Western Alliance upon nuclear weapons, and the responsibilities this imposes.)

None of this is to suggest that Candid Camera might have led viewers to confuse Robert McNamara with, say, Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson could not, I suppose, cut quite the positive, dogmatic figure McNamara presented, even as a deliberate facade; and that is only a sign of deeper differences between them. If an intimate conversation reveals qualities that did not appear before this television camera (any more than before a Congressional committee), it does not reveal, for example, evident humility, uncertainty, or lack of self-confidence in his own judgment. (At least, mine did not.) In short, the program was at least true to the elements of truth in the stereotypes of the Secretary. And that encompasses a good part of his public personality. Perhaps no program was likely to do more.